SERMONS

BY THE

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*RECTOR OF CLAPHAM.*

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SERMON XX.

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*THE NATURE AND VALUE OF HUMAN LIFE.*

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PSALM lxxxix. 47.

*Remember how short my time is. Wherefore hast*

*thou made all men in vain?*

THE Psalmist composed the psalm of which the words just read are a part, under very great depression of mind. Disappointed in hopes which appeared to be founded on the promises of God, and reduced to a state of the lowest misery and distress, he surveys, as was natural, the miseries of human life, and considers its shortness and its vanity. Impatient of the sufferings allotted to him, he at length breaks out into the prayer of my text, “How long, Lord, wilt thou hide thyself? Forever? Shall thy wrath burn like fire? Re­member how short my time is. Wherefore hast thou made all men in vain?” “Oh spare the rod of thine anger! Consider how short my life is, even at the longest; how much more so under thy punishment! For we consume away in thine anger, and perish under thy wrathful displeasure. Wherefore hast thou made all men in vain, as they appear to be, if their life, vain and short as it is, is still to be abridged and rendered more miserable by thy severe chastisements?”

The affections upon which such an address is founded, are very natural to a person in the situation of the Psalmist. It is not to be wondered at if he should see every object through a gloomy medium, and, beholding the shortness of life and the vanity of it, should be ready to conclude that all men were made “in vain,” or “for nought,” as it is rendered in the old translation.

In another point of view, however, short as human life is, it does not appear to be in vain. On the contrary, the most important purposes may be answered by it. We shall therefore divide this discourse into two parts, correspondent to these two different views of the value of the life of man.

I. If we consider life, then, as it is in itself, and form our estimate of its value only by the degree of temporal enjoyment it is capable of affording, it will appear to be very vain indeed; and man will almost seem to be made for nothing.

1. Consider how *short* life is!—It is represented in Scripture by every image which can denote things fugitive and transitory. It is as a dream; as a watch in the night; as a shadow that departeth; as grass which in the morning groweth up and is green, and in the evening is cut down, dried up, and withereth. All that is certain of life is what is already past. And how short does that part of it appear! Ten or twenty years, when we look forward to them, appear to be of long duration: but when we review them as already spent, every mind is struck with the justice of the reflection, how soon are they gone! And at the end of the longest life, long as it may appear to the young and thoughtless, yet the man of fourscore years, who from experience knows how to make a better estimate of its duration, will tell you, that to him it appeareth only as yesterday that is past.

2. Consider its *uncertainty*.—Short as the period of life is when extended to its natural termination, how often do we see that period shortened, perhaps forcibly; broken suddenly, without warning, in the midst of apparent health and strength, which promised the continuance of many years! Thus man dies, and his expectations perish. His schemes and plans for the successful completion of which years were still wanting, as years had already been spent in promoting them, are all cut off in a moment; cut off as it were by accident, and not through any want of prudence or attention on his part; without any regard to the useful or beneficent designs which he was employed in advancing. Alas! how little does death consider our plans! The deep-laid schemes of villainy, or the righteous purposes of the just; the enjoyment of long-sought pleasure just within the reach, and the honest endeavour to provide for a numerous and indigent family, are, with equal abruptness, broken off and for ever terminated by his resist­less stroke. Who can say of any project that he has formed, that he shall accomplish it? Who can say, Tomorrow I will do this, or will go there? For who knoweth what tomorrow may bring forth?

3. Survey also the *sufferings* to which life is exposed in this short existence.—Take notice of the natural calamities which belong to man; the diseases of which the seeds are sown in his frame; the various accidents to which he is liable, and from which no prudence or foresight can exempt him. Look at the history of man, and see what he suffers from his own species. Observe the dreadful effects of wars and the barbarous deso­lations of which we read in history. Recollect what cruel tyrants there have been in the world, who have been permitted to sport, as it were, with the pangs of their fellow-creatures. Think how many have been undone by unjust laws, judges, or witnesses; what terrible proscriptions and cruel persecutions have wasted mankind. Indeed, the history of the world is little else than the history of a series of distressing and cruel events; and a very large part of it, however things may be palliated and gilded over, can scarcely be read by a benevolent man without astonishment and horror. In short, what spectacles of misery present themselves every where to the eye, which, if this life be the whole of existence, force us to say, Why hast thou made all men in vain!

4. Look also at the *business* of life, the very end for which most men live, and the same re­flection will forcibly recur.—I say nothing of the labour and discipline which are necessary in order to form us for active life, the difficulty with which proper employments and stations are obtained, the hardships we may have to encounter, the frauds practised upon us, the risks we run, and the dis­appointments we meet with, even in the pursuit of a bare subsistence. Of these I say nothing, though in truth they are felt very acutely: years of labour and exertion, of prudence and forethought, cannot be utterly lost, as they often are, without the most painful emotions.

But what is the business of life in itself? What is the end for which so much toil is endured, so many cares and anxieties suffered? Simply this; to go on suffering the same anxieties and cares, and enduring the same toil. How great a part of mankind is doomed to labour hard, in order to gain by the sweat of their brow—what? Merely provision, in order that life may go on, and the same round may be continued. And even those in more affluent circumstances; those whose labours have been successful, and who have acquired all that their hopes could aspire to, what have they obtained? Still their one great object is to carry on life; to continue the enjoyment of health; to guard against its decays; to refresh the body with rest and with food, that existence may be pro­longed in the same unvarying round. And may it not be asked, Is this all? Is the repetition, year after year—the same succession of food, and rest, and solicitude, and vanity, and short and mixed pleasures, and hopes, and disappointments;—is this life? How many possessed of all the advantages which fortune could give them, yet weary of them all, have exclaimed, Wherefore hast thou made all men in vain!

II. Such reflections as these naturally occur to every person who sits down to survey human life, and to compute the sum of its value. He will consider the large proportion of time in child­hood and youth necessary to prepare us for life, the amount of what is consumed in taking the rest and food which our bodies require, the quantity employed in procuring necessary subsistence and the conveniences and accommodations of life; and after all these are reckoned up, these means of living, rather than life itself, how little of it remains! What a shadow is life! Lord, wherefore hast thou made all men for nought?

But however obvious such a view of life may be, and however natural such reflections upon it, that view is imperfect and those reflections unjust. However naturally that view of it upon which such reflections are founded, may present itself to those who esteem the enjoyments of this life as their only hope, and who have met with disappoint­ments in it, it is nevertheless partial and defective. Let us look at life in another point of view; let us consider it as giving us an opportunity of doing the will of God; let us take it in connection with a future state; let us associate it with the re­demption effected by our blessed Saviour; and then life, short as it is, and uncertain as it is, will acquire a new value, and we shall see that God has not made man in vain.

1. He has not made all men in vain, if we con­sider the value of doing the will of God.—What is life? Is it merely eating and drinking, and en­joying sensual pleasures? Is that to be called life in man which he shares in common with the brute beasts that perish? Do we so forget our dignity? Why have we an immortal soul capable of knowing God and serving him? Here then an important view of life opens itself to us. We live not to eat, and to drink, and to labour; but we eat and drink, and labour, in order to live; that is, to fulfil the will of our great Creator and to glorify his name. Now this is done when his will is made the chief rule of our lives, and his glory the end of our actions; when we exercise dispo­sitions proper to our stations in life and agreeable to the duties we owe to him. In this light the events of life are comparatively of little import­ance: it is the duties they call forth which are really so. In this light it is indifferent whether a man be rich or poor, fortunate or unfortunate in life. These are only circumstances; these are trials to call forth the exercise of proper dispo­sitions. These are only means to produce an end, and that end is to honour and glorify God by resignation and trust in adverse circumstances; by humility and thankfulness in prosperity; by a diligent discharge of those duties which God has ordained in every situation and station in life. In this view, life is not to be regarded as given in vain, because we meet with hardships and disappoint­ments: let the great object of life be to serve God, and these hardships become only secondary considerations, such as are indeed of little moment compared with the great end of life.

This, my brethren, we must own, is a just view of the subject, when we consider it in connection with the powers and capacities which God has given us. But are we acting according to this view? To what, then, are our desires and hopes chiefly directed? To the attainment of the things of this life? To procure all the means for carrying on life with more comfort, and less inconvenience, and less danger of suffering? Alas! besides that this is a vain expectation which we cannot realize, we are mistaking the very end of life; we are wrong in the very foundation on which we build. What else would a brute beast, that perishes, desire? No: propose to yourself another end of life, an end unconnected with circumstances and events which it is not in your power to control; propose to yourself the fulfilment of God’s will; study that will; let it be your object to do it; and then there will be no reason to complain that God has made his creatures in vain.

2. Consider also human life in reference to a *fu­ture state*, and its importance will rise upon us.—If, indeed, God had terminated our existence with the present life, we might have been ready to exclaim, Wherefore has God made man in vain! But when we carry our view forward to that eternal state of which this life is but the beginning, and in comparison of which it is but a moment; when we reflect that the soul which quits the dying body, and the body dissolved into corruption, shall again be united and shall live for ever and ever in a new state; when we consider that this eternal life will be either miserable or happy according to the manner in which we spend our short ex­istence here; surely this life is not in vain: it becomes of infinite importance,—an importance proportioned to that infinite happiness or woe with which it is necessarily connected.

Alas! how short-sighted is man! How blind to points of the first importance! How eagerly are all his thoughts, his hopes, and fears engaged in forming plans and contriving schemes for the enjoyment of tomorrow, or of the next year, or of the next fifty years! It matters not which we take: they are all expressions of the same mean­ing; they are all equally as a moment of time with respect to eternity. But, alas! what folly is it that with such care about the body which is dying, the world which is perishing before our eyes, time which is perpetually disappearing, we should so little care about that eternal state in which we are to live for ever, when this dream is over! When we shall have existed ten thousand years in another world, where will be all the cares and fears and enjoyments of this? In what light then shall we look upon the things which now transport us with joy, or overwhelm us with grief? What trifles will they all appear! And now they appear comparatively trifles to the mind which duly contemplates and realizes eternity.

Eternity! Awful word; at the sound of which we awake as out of sleep! Eternity! Before its view, how do the councils of princes, the plots of ambition, the revolutions of states, and the fates of empires, shrink into nothing! Ye immor­tal souls, whom I address upon the most important subject, ponder, I pray you, upon that eternal state to which you are swiftly carried by the flood of time! You see your fellow-creatures around you dying; you take a hasty glance at the shifting scenes around you, the harmony and end of which you see not; you ask, Why was man made in vain; why does he come into life only to be dissolved again? Alas! you mistake; you see man going out at the gate of death, but you see not the extent of country behind. All the busy tribes of men whose memorial has long perished here; these all are living in another state, whose happi­ness and misery, objects and attainments, are upon a scale infinitely greater than all the things of this transitory life. And is it so, indeed, that your happiness in that state depends upon your life here? Who, then, can speak in terms of sufficient emphasis of the value of this life? Awake thou that sleepest! Awake thou that dreamest of days and years; awake to contemplate ages! Thou that lookest at a family, a sect, a tribe, survey as­sembled worlds! Thou that art oppressed with the pains and aches and weakness of a vile body, behold a spiritual body pure and free from infir­mity! Thou that buryest all thy hopes in the earth upon which thy foot treadeth, see what a state of immortality and glory remains after this earth is burned up, and the elements have been dissolved with fervent heat! Oh, look to that state; let all your hopes centre in attaining a happiness which only then begins to exist, when all the schemes of worldly greatness and worldly bliss are extinguished, to live no more!

3. Survey human life also in connection with *the work of Redemption*, and we shall find that man is not made for nought.—Are the days of our pilgrimage here few and evil; and does the life of man seem to be only a mixture of vanity and vexation? Yet see how the glory of Christ the Redeemer, and of God through him are connected with it. What a value is stamped upon life; what dignity upon the world, when we behold the only Son of God taking upon him that life, and coming into that world! Are men made in vain, when the only-begotten of the Father gave his life as a ransom for theirs? Here indeed we see the honour of man: he may become one with Christ, and Christ with him. Much as his life is chequered with vicissitudes, degraded by mean­ness, defiled by pollution, burdened with cares, oppressed with sorrow, and abridged by death; it is more than ennobled by the solicitude which the Almighty has expressed for it; by the bounty of Heaven, which daily ministers to its necessities; by the love of Christ, who gave his own life a ransom for sinners; by the offices he undertakes in behalf of those who make application to him; by the means of grace provided for the benefit of their souls; by the promises of the Gospel held out to them; and by the influences of the Holy Ghost shed abroad in their hearts. Is man, then, made in vain who has the Spirit of God for his Guide, the Son of God for his Redeemer, the Almighty for his Father, the Gospel for his sup­port, and heaven for his home? No: he is blessed and favoured indeed. He is honoured with pri­vileges and blessings resembling those of angels. But what am I saying? Are men in general so honoured? Alas! with respect to many, we must still say, Wherefore hast thou made all men in vain? But in what state are we, my brethren? Is it our care to be found united to Christ by a living and true faith? Is it the great employment of our lives to be partakers of that grace and peace which he communicates? Have we re­nounced the world, with its pomps and vanities? Do we say in our hearts, Away with its glittering, perishing follies; I seek more substantial blessings; I have an immortal soul, I seek its salvation; I am a sinner, and I labour to be delivered from my sins; I want to enjoy communion with God my Creator, and to be made meet for a better world above? If such are our hopes and desires, we are really living to great ends; we are enjoying life in the only sense in which it deserves that name. Without this we have still to learn the very end for which life was given to man; for which he was created and placed in the world.

Lastly, is life of so much importance, and yet is *it short also*? What an additional value does it acquire even from this circumstance, which seems at first sight to diminish its worth! In this view, a day, an hour, is of great importance. If life is so *uncertain*; if almost the only thing certain in life is that we shall die, and we know not how soon; what manner of persons ought we to be?—Are we laying this to heart? Do we say to ourselves, “Life is too important to be trifled with: too valuable to be wasted in things which have no importance beyond the present period? I have a great work to do, and little time in which to perform it. Death is at hand: the Judge is at the door. Oh, let me improve the precious though fleeting moments! They may be improved so as to make me partaker of the favour of God, and of eternal happiness.” Short as life is, it is long enough to answer this purpose; and when it has done this, it matters not how soon it is terminated. It will be continued to greater advantage in another state. Happy is the person who acts under these views. They are the views which Christianity gives of this world and this life. May it so teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom!